



Action for Healthy Kids.

Progress or Promises?

What's Working For and Against Healthy Schools

An Action for Healthy Kids Brief for Parents Fall 2008

What is school wellness?

School wellness encompasses healthy eating, adequate physical activity, nutrition education, and physical education for all students. Improving school wellness practices is essential to decreasing childhood obesity and preparing children to live healthy, active, productive lives.

“School wellness” is a term that every parent needs to know. School wellness impacts children’s performance in the classroom and influences their lifelong habits of healthful eating and active living.

Why should parents get involved with school wellness?

Healthy children learn better. Therefore, school wellness practices are vitally important. The quality of nutrition and amount of physical activity that children get in school impacts their academic success as well as their current and future health and well-being.

The voice of parents can change schools. Parent advocates can influence successful improvements to school nutrition and physical activity.

Without parental involvement, school wellness initiatives simply cannot succeed. Parents must remain vigilant of current wellness practices to ensure that their children are physically active every day and consume healthful foods and beverages. And schools need parents to actively support and encourage their children to make healthy food choices and be physically active at school and at home.

What do parents think about school wellness — and about their role in creating healthy school environments?

According to a new survey from Action for Healthy Kids:

Parents want schools to offer more nutritious foods and more opportunities for physical activity.

> 82% feel that schools should provide more nutritious, appealing meals and snacks.

> 80% feel that schools should offer children more opportunities for physical

activity during the school day.

Parents see themselves as important players to improve nutrition and physical activity in schools.

> 96% say that it is important for parents to play a role in improving school meals and increasing physical activity.

Even though they feel welcome by their child’s school, few parents get involved to improve nutrition and physical activity at school.

> 24% have contacted their school to request that improvements be made to school meals so they are more nutritious and appealing.

> 24% have contacted their school to request more time for physical activity, such as more frequent physical education or recess.

> 73% feel that their schools welcome parental involvement and suggestions on improving school nutrition and physical activity opportunities.

Can parents make a difference in creating healthy schools?

Parents are already making a difference!

> In Michigan, Action for Healthy Kids helped the state’s department of education set up “Parent Champions for School Wellness” to bring parents into a comprehensive, statewide initiative to promote school wellness. The effort provided valuable information to parents about the federal school wellness legislation.

> In Colorado, Action for Healthy Kids provided parent advocacy training via an



original "Parents are the Power" toolkit developed by the Colorado Action for Healthy Kids Team.

> Parent-involvement success stories are featured in Action for Healthy Kids "Field Reports," available at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.



What do parents need to become involved with school wellness?

Information. Neither parents, nor school health professionals, nor community health providers feel that schools are doing enough to provide information to parents on the importance of daily physical activity or sound nutrition.

Encouragement. Research indicates that parents are interested in serving as wellness advocates; however, they are looking for information and guidance about school wellness. They simply don't know enough about the wellness climate and processes in their schools to take specific actions.

Empowerment. Because parents have power, they make great wellness advocates when they are informed, mobilized, and properly equipped. They can greatly influence school wellness policies and practices; and they can reinforce healthy eating and physical activity habits at home.

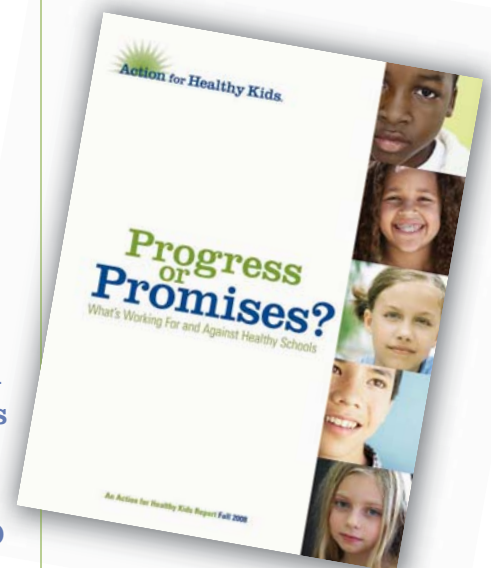
What action steps can parents take to support school wellness?

Although there is growing concern among many parents and caregivers from all socioeconomic groups about the effects of childhood obesity, this concern has just not consistently translated into meaningful engagement. Here are some action steps parents can take:

- > Take action to shape your children's attitudes about nutrition and being physically active. Be a good role model.
- > Make it a point to stay informed about your school's wellness practices, which often change from year to year.
- > Join your child in the lunchroom to see firsthand what is available. Praise what is good about the meal and encourage your child to sample these foods.

- > Call your child's principal to inquire about your school district's wellness policy and offer to help implement the policy.
- > Work with your school's foodservice staff to add fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, or milk in updated, attractive packaging.
- > Help your school to organize walkathons, improve playground facilities, and sponsor wellness-themed fundraisers, among other strategies.
- > Most importantly, share your enthusiasm for improving your school's nutrition and physical activity practices with other parents. Lots of them!
- > Visit www.ActionForHealthyKids.org for more information and to join your state's Action for Healthy Kids Team.

Progress or Promises? What's Working For and Against Healthy Schools This fall 2008 Action for Healthy Kids Report examines efforts to improve nutrition and physical activity in schools. It provides a comprehensive evaluation of current school wellness practices, reflecting findings from a recent survey of more than 2,000 national experts and professionals in the field. In addition to analyzing new and existing data, the report also includes the authoritative voices of numerous leaders in children's health, education, and school wellness.



An executive summary and the full report is available at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

What are some of the overall messages contained in *Progress or Promises? What's Working For and Against School Wellness*, a fall 2008 report from Action for Healthy Kids?

Many kids aren't getting all of the nutrients they need.

Improving the nutritional quality of existing foods and beverages served at school is critical to addressing the wellness needs of children.

Schools' top priority is not healthy kids.

Other school priorities – especially the strong focus on addressing academic requirements – are overshadowing efforts to improve nutrition and physical activity at school.

Physical education and physical activity are low priorities.

Despite proven benefits to learning and academic achievement, there is inadequate funding and time for daily P.E. and physical activity.

Getting "junk food" out of schools is only part of the solution.

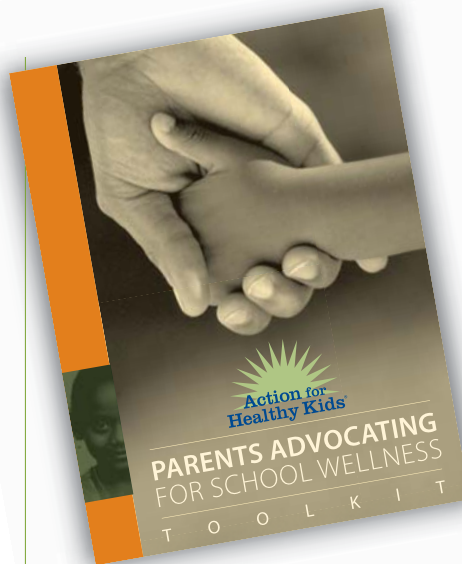
A pressing need is for schools to help students make better food choices by providing tasty, youth-appealing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat and fat-free milk and milk products.

Roadblocks and gaps are hampering progress.

Although some progress has been made, many systemic barriers and gaps in perceptions block wide-spread improvements in school wellness. For example, most school administrators think school wellness practices are succeeding, whereas parents disagree.

School wellness is needed most in underserved communities.

Children in underserved communities often experience higher levels of overweight and obesity and also face additional hurdles, including the lack of access to grocery stores with fresh, healthful, and affordable foods, and unsafe and inadequate playgrounds and parks.



What is *Parents Advocating for School Wellness*?

Parents Advocating for School Wellness is a new Action for Healthy Kids resource to help motivate and assist parents to move from awareness of wellness issues to hands-on advocacy. This toolkit of information is designed to help recruit and train parents to work with community partners and schools to improve nutrition and physical activity in schools.

A free, downloadable PDF of *Parents Advocating for School Wellness* is available at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

Where do I turn for further information?

Visit www.ActionForHealthyKids.org for further details on our parent resource, Parents Advocating for School Wellness, as well as other resources to promote school wellness:

Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge™ – developed in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services — shows how to support your school's long-range, comprehensive wellness policy by making proper nutrition and physical activity part of the rhythm and culture of the entire school.

ReCharge! Energizing After-school™ – an after-school program that integrates nutrition and physical activity through teamwork-based strategies for youth in grades 3-6, developed in partnership with the National Football League.

URWhatUEat – a forthcoming resource for youth, designed to help them make better food choices.

